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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BAGHDAD 004748

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SUBJECT: SECURITY OF PALESTINIANS IN BAGHDAD DETERIORATING

REF: A. NEA/I CLASSIFIED O-I FOR NOVEMBER 16

1B. 2006

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Margaret Scobey

This is an action cable. See paragraph 13-14 for action request

11. (C) Summary: Nine Palestinians were killed on December 13 when several mortars hit their housing compound in Baghdad. The hits were likely deliberate, and follow a series of attacks, kidnappings, threats and harassment against Palestinians. Iraqi officials lament this violence and admit their impotence to stop it. In some instances, Iraqi police reportedly collaborated with the perpetrators. Prominent Shia leaders' have called for respect for the rights of Palestinians, with limited success. Several hundred Palestinians, hoping to find asylum in Syria, have ended up camped in the border under harsh conditions. Thousands of others are believed to have left Iraq on fake or illegally obtained Iraqi passports. It is estimated that between 6,000 and 15,000 Palestinians remain in Baghdad, down from 23,000 to 25,000 in 2003.

12. (C) Summary continued: Jaysh Al-Mahdi (JAM) militias are reportedly responsible for the anti-Palestinian sectarian violence. According to members of the Palestinian community, the JAM suspects Palestinians of terrorism and support for insurgents, resent their privileged status under Saddam, and covet Palestinians' government-owned apartments. United Nations High Commission for Refugees' (UNHCR) efforts to secure a Palestinian safe haven in or outside of Iraq have not bore fruit. UNHCR has suggested placing the Palestinians under MNF-I protection in the military side of Baghdad's International Airport. The hardship of Palestinians in Baghdad is comparable to that of Sunni, Shia or Christian victims of ethno-sectarian violence, but Palestinians' options --to leave Iraq or to move to another part of the country-- are circumscribed by their condition as stateless refugees and their minority status.

Background

13. (U) Most Palestinians in Iraq are the descendants of the 4,000 to 5,000 refugees welcomed to the (then) kingdom of Iraq in 1948, following the first Arab-Israeli war. A second group, believed to be in the hundreds, arrived after the six-day war in 1967. In 1991, the community grew with the arrival of some one hundred Palestinian families expelled from Kuwait after its liberation. The rights of Palestinians are laid out in the Political Refugee Act of 1971, which: grants refugees the right to work and access to education and health; gives the Ministry of Interior authority to decide

where refugees live; and establishes an inter-ministerial Permanent Committee for the Affairs of Political Refugees. This committee currently includes the ministries of interior (chair), defense, displacement and migration (MODM), the ministry of state for national security, and the national intelligence service.

¶4. (SBU) The Palestinians that entered Iraq in 1948 were assigned apartments in government-owned housing compounds. The 1948 Palestinians and many of their descendants continue to live in these compounds throughout Baghdad. The Palestinian compound of Baladiat (Nine Nissan District), the largest of these housing projects, is comprised of 768 apartments in 16 buildings. Each apartment is generally home to at least two families (twelve people). The second largest compound is in the Al-Saha neighborhood of the Al-Doura district, with 99 apartments. About 400 families not living in government-owned apartments have their rents paid by UNHCR through MODM. Other families live in privately-rented apartments, generally adjacent or close to Palestinian compounds.

Instances of violence

¶5. (SBU) Palestinians are not alone in suffering sectarian violence. On December 13, in addition to the nine Palestinians, seventy-seven people were killed in sixteen incidents of ethno-sectarian violence in Baghdad. Thousands of Shias, Sunnis and Christians are internally displaced persons (IDPs) or have left the country. In general, Sunni IDPs have sought refuge with relatives or fellow tribes in western Iraq, Shias have gravitated towards the south and

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Christians that have not left the country have headed north. Palestinians are a minority concentrated in a handful of neighborhoods in Baghdad. There are no communities of fellow Palestinians that can host them outside the capital. As stateless refugees, Palestinians don't have passports and are not currently admitted in Syria, Jordan, or any other country.

¶6. (SBU) Some of the JAM attacks, killings, kidnappings and threats against Palestinians in Baghdad since last September that members of the Palestinian community have reported to the Embassy Refugee Coordinator (RefCoord) include:

-- On September 25, JAM distributed threatening leaflets to Palestinians in Al-Saha, Doura district. The threat demanded "1967" Palestinian refugees to leave Iraq in twenty-four hours or face decapitation. MNF-I preventatively increased patrols in the area. On September 29, armed militias returned to Al-Saha to renew their threats, which were not carried out.

-- On September 27, the Palestinian husband, son, and four Iraqi brothers of an Iraqi woman were abducted and murdered in Al-Huriya, Kadhamiyah district. The kidnappers did not make any demands or asked for ransom. RefCoord learned about this incident from more than one source, underscoring its veracity.

-- On October 7, Palestinian in the Al-Huriya neighborhood, Kadhamiyah district, were threatened and harassed. One Palestinian was reportedly beaten.

-- On October 19, three Palestinians died from a mortar attack on the Baladiat compound, and two others were seriously wounded. MNF-I responded to the incident by providing first aid and transportation to hospitals.

-- On November 4, between fifty and sixty Palestinian families in Baghdad Al-Jadida, Nissan district, temporarily vacated their homes after receiving threats. Most of the families returned after the situation calmed down.

-- On November 8, an elderly Palestinian man was reportedly abducted from his home. He was found dead two days later.

-- On November 24, Sheik Tawfiq Abdul Khaliq, a religious leader from the Palestinian community, was kidnapped in the Al-Doura district. On November 27, his dead body was found with signs of torture.

-- On December 1, militias shot and killed a Palestinian man in a street in Baladiat. Also on December 1, two Palestinians in the Al-Fadl area of Central Baghdad were reportedly kidnapped and later found dead.

¶17. (SBU) Grand Ayatollah Sayid al-Sistani issued a statement on April 30 forbidding attacks on Palestinians --as have some other Shia clerics since-- which may have prevented a more severe onslaught on the community but this has not stopped the threats, harassment and the more recent attacks against the Baladiat compound. In response to the November 4 threats against the Baghdad Al-Jadida residents, members of that community asked local Shia clerics to reign over the militias. The clerics maintained they had no control over the militias, and advised the Palestinians to leave their homes, at least temporarily. The Palestinian Mission Charge d'Affaires, Dalil al Kosos, approached Sadrists organizations in October to plea for an end to the militias' harassment and violence. Al Kosos received assurances that the Sadrists were not against the Palestinians, but JAM threats continued.

The failure of clerics and Sadrists organizations to reign over the JAM underscore the militias' impunity and hardly restrainable behavior.

Government attitude and response

¶18. (C) Within the GOI, MODM is formally responsible for the welfare of Palestinians in Iraq, but its capacity to fulfill this mandate is lacking. MODM has not taken any initiative to better protect the refugees, and is relying on the ministry of interior to complete a census of the Palestinians. The chairman of the GOI refugee committee and Director General of Passports and Nationality at the Ministry of Interior, Major General Yasseen Al-Yassiri, has played a constructive role in addressing the legal concerns of the Palestinians. Yassiri has confirmed that refugees are exempt from the onerous registration requirements laid out in Iraq's residency law, and is working with the committee on a plan to

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issue refugee identity cards to the Palestinians. However, these legal protection initiatives -- which may take months to implement -- will have little effect against JAM threats and violence. Iraqi authorities have asserted that the GOI is not trying to force the Palestinians out of the country, but maintain that they have an extremely limited capacity to protect them from the JAM, noting that Palestinians face the same security problems as Iraqis.

¶19. (C) The Refugee Manager at the Office of the Palestine Liberation Organization in Baghdad, Mohammed Abed Al Wahid (protect) has no doubt that JAM and Iraqi police cooperate in carrying out threats and attacks against Palestinians. In a meeting with the RefCoord on October 1, Al Wahid noted that the JAM militias that had distributed threats in Doura on September 25 did not seem to have any problems violating the curfew in effect that day or clearing checkpoints with their weapons. He said that the Palestinians do not trust and thus do not call the police when they are threatened. Instead, they call the Palestinian Mission in Baghdad, MNF-I, and the American Embassy, adding that they only trust MNF-I to protect them. Some in the Iraqi government view the Palestinian community as a security risk. Abed Al Kareem, a National Police General that monitors refugee populations at the Ministry of Interior, stated to the RefCoord on October 2

that some Palestinians are supporting the insurgents and are engaged in terrorism (NFI). RefCoord is aware that there is a handful of Palestinians detained by MNF-I (on a recent list nine out of over 13,000 detainees were Palestinians).

Palestinian websites (although not necessarily from Iraq) have posted statements supporting Saddam and criticizing his trial, which has contributed to the dislike many Iraqis feel for them.

¶10. (C) Al Kareem maintained that refugees that came to Iraq in 1967 have no right to be in the country and should return to Gaza or Egypt. He has promoted this view with MODM and MOI officials, and even asked the RefCoord to support it. Al Wahid told RefCoord that he thought Kareem's ideas had reached the JAM, which would explain the September 25 threat against "1967" Palestinians in particular. Fortunately, the refugee permanent committee has not accepted this view and considers all Palestinians in Iraq to be refugees. When asked if the Iraqi police could do anything to crack down on the threats and violence against the Palestinians, Al Kareem said it could not. UNHCR's Officer in Charge for Central Iraq, Mohammed Al Ani (protect), does not agree with a sweeping characterization of Palestinians as terrorists or insurgents. He lamented, however, that Hamas is present and organized within the Iraqi Palestinian community (NFI).

Search for a safe haven

¶11. (SBU) UNHCR has informally approached countries in the region and beyond (NFI) to sound the possibility of evacuating Palestinians out of Iraq. In May, the Syrian government allowed entry to 294 Palestinians who had been stranded at various border posts, but Syria is no longer allowing Palestinians to enter. Approximately 350 Palestinians are currently camped in harsh conditions at the At-Tanf border crossing between Syria and Iraq, hoping for Syria to allow them entry or for UNHCR to find them third country resettlement. Jordan is not admitting Palestinians either. Canada has agreed to resettle 63 of the 150 Palestinians that Jordan had reluctantly admitted to its Ruweished camp 50 miles from the border with Iraq. Some other countries, including the US, may agree to resettle small numbers of families from Ruweished. No country, however, has agreed to admit a large number of Palestinians from Iraq.

¶12. (C) Janvier de Riedmatten, UNHCR's Representative for Iraq Operations (based in Amman) and RefCoord have discussed with Kurdish Regional Government representatives the possibility of allowing Palestinians to temporarily relocate to Kurdistan. On November 28, RefCoord raised the issue with Minister Dilshad Miran, Head of the Kurdish Region Representation in Baghdad. Miran explained that the KRG is already hosting thousands of IDPs fleeing violence in other parts of the country, and implied that the KRG views Arab immigration as a security liability. He added, however, that he would present to the KRG council of ministers any proposal that UNHCR may have. During a visit to Erbil in early December, De Riedmatten discussed this possibility with Karim Sinjari, KRG Minister of Interior. Sinjari recommended De Riedmatten to present to KRG PM Nerchevan Barzani a formal request, and said that if the KRG would agree to allow the

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Palestinians in, they would be placed in a camp under KRG surveillance and their freedom of movement would be restricted. De Riedmatten told RefCoord that his UNHCR colleagues in Erbil were doubtful that the KRG would agree to host the Palestinians. De Riedmatten added that he would nevertheless write to Barzani.

Possible Courses of Action

¶13. (C) Embassy Baghdad encourages the Department to consider the following options for action:

- a) Emergency assistance to establish a safe haven inside Iraq: We would actively engage authorities in select provinces to inquire about the possibility of relocating Palestinians to these provinces. The provinces would be selected for their relative security, and for their ethnic/religious composition. The USG would commit to finance projects in the host communities to entice their acceptance of the Palestinians.
- b) Demarche governments in the region to admit Palestinians: The Department would decide which countries to demarche. Several countries could each be urged to take a quota of Palestinians, minimizing the burden on any one country. The relocation could be proposed in terms of a temporary humanitarian evacuation.
- c) Admit Palestinians from Iraq into the US and encourage other countries with formal refugee admission programs to do the same. If countries in the region decline to admit them, countries with formal admission programs should arguably be less reluctant to accept Palestinian referrals.
- d) Ask UNHCR and the GOI to provide housing allowances in cash to allow Palestinian families that have been threatened to rent houses in neighborhoods and cities where they may feel safe. We would ask the GOI to allow the Palestinians to move to neighborhoods and cities of their choosing, and the government-owned housing that the Palestinians now occupy would return to the GOI.
- e) Our default, of course, is to continue to monitor the situation of the refugees and planning for contingencies if there is a need to take action more quickly. Indeed, violence has become a fact of life affecting all ethnic and sectarian groups in Iraq, and appears to have affected the Palestinian population to date at virtually the same degree as other groups. In addition, many of the Palestinians are employed and integrated to varying degrees, in their current locations. The drawback to this approach is that the timing of an attack against the Palestinians -- as with any group in Iraq -- may not be predictable.

Comment

¶14. (C) None of the current options would provide a near-term solution for the Palestinians. Post fully recognizes the hesitance with which other countries in the region may receive requests to accept these refugees and the challenges encountered in seeking placement in the U.S., Canada, or Europe. With Department's concurrence and guidance, we will continue to examine possible domestic solutions, although this could face similar resistance. We also request the Department examine what international options and resources -- potentially beyond those laid out above -- may be available and could provide a mid to long-term solution.

SCOBAY